

The Mokis Dance to Propitiate God of Rain

By H. G. TINSLEY

SMITHSONIAN archeologists say that the most interesting aboriginal ceremonies performed nowadays in America take place in midsummer days among the Moki Indians, who live in Northeastern Arizona. Scarcely touched by our civilization and clinging to ancestral customs, the Mokis perform during the last days of each August dances and rites in propitiation of their god of rain, identical with those of their ancestors ages before Columbus sailed from Spain.

Mokiland, or the Province of Tusuyan as the Spaniards named it in the early part of the sixteenth century, is the richest part of the Union for prehistoric exploration. Cities of strong, intelligent people flourished here in the time of the Caesars. Ruins of heathen temples, which crumbled before the Montezuma dynasty began, lie among the drifting sands. The land of the Mokis abounds in ancient traditions still kept in their pristine freshness.

This month two score of American ethnologists and archeologists, besides some from Europe, have gathered in the Moki pueblos to study the customs, habits, thought and traditions of man in prehistoric America, as they have come down through generations of Mokis.

Spanish adventurers under Coronado reckoned in 1542 that there were about 13,000 souls in the Tusuyan confederacy of Moki tribes. Now there are but a few hundred Mokis. They are known also as Hopis; and their name signifies "peace loving." They have a tradition that several hundred years ago the warlike Apaches waged a terrific war against the tribe. The remnant of the Mokis fled in terror and took refuge on the two great tablelands of red sandstone which rise sheer some seventy feet out of a vast sea of sand. The great rocky formation has been a veritable Gibraltar of defense to the tribe and from the day the ancestral Mokis fled they and their descendants have dwelt there isolated. Rain is the all-essential element in the success of Moki agriculture, and in the desert region rains come capriciously.

The date of the Moki snake dance is determined by an old medicine man in the tribe. When during August the sun at its setting glints the sacred rock that stands before the door of the tribal kiva, the old medicine man, Honi, mounts the highest point at either Walpi or Oraibi and solemnly gives notice that sixteen sunsets hence the solemn snake ceremonies will take place. He ends by invoking all to begin immediate preparation for the occasion. The women are to bake for a tribal feast, to dress themselves and their children in their best garments, and the men are to perform their several parts in the ceremonies.

A certain number of young men, appointed for the purpose, start out at next dawn to perform their part of the preparation for the dance. They are *jakulali* (snake gatherers). They roam over the desert with a forked stick in one hand and a bag made of skins in the other. They know where to look for rattlesnakes and sometimes they get more than 200 serpents in a week. They plant the forks of their sticks over the neck of the recumbent snake, and by an adroit movement throw the reptile into the bag. The serpents are brought to the pueblo and turned over to the old snake priests.

Six days after the official announcement of the annual snake ceremonies, mysterious rites among twenty-seven of the foremost men in the Moki tribe begin in a chamber hewn into the rock down below the pueblo. This is the kiva, the holy of holies in Moki belief. Dr. J. Walter Fewkes, of the Smithsonian Institution, is the only white person who has ever entered the kiva, and he says that the ceremonies there consist in washing the serpents captured and brought there by young men. The old men engage in barbaric incantations, and chant appeals to the serpents to bear messages of devotion and friendship to the powers that rule the rain clouds. The snake priests wear nothing to protect themselves from the reptiles' fangs. Each day they wash the rattlesnakes, sprinkle sacred corn meal on the serpents' heads, and deposit the creatures in jars. Meanwhile the Moki housewives cook and bake in preparation for the event of the year—the snake dance on the plaza of the pueblo. The gaudiest tribal finery is brought forth and made ready. White and Navajo Indian visitors come across the desert to see the public ceremonies and for a week all Mokiland bustles and buzzes.

At the setting of the sixteenth sun from the official announcement by old Honi the snake dance takes place. Late in the afternoon the spectators arrange themselves in vantage spots overlooking the plaza where the dance is performed. Some 2,500 persons are generally on hand to see the ancient marvelous ceremony. The roofs of the squat stone houses are crowded. Moki children with scarcely a stitch on them sit along the cornices with their brown legs hanging down. There are cowboys from all over the territory, reporters from newspapers, scientists from the cities, and hundreds of Indians in brilliant and quaint costumes. It is a rare scene; "one fit for a salon picture," said an enthusiastic artist. The white people laugh, the dogs and children make tumult, while every one awaits the opening of the dance. At just about six o'clock when the sun is dropping into the yellow desert away to the west, some one calls, "Here they come." Instantly there is silence. Everybody knows that the antelope men—young, athletic snake dancers—are at last issuing from their stone chamber. The braves are scantily clad, and on each leg is a small terrapin shell, in which are placed small pebbles, which rattle as the warrior moves, and make of him, in sound at least, a human rattler. The dancers are smeared with red, white and black paints. Around each brow is bound a flaming red handkerchief, the upper forehead being painted a deep black, and the lower half with black and white bands.

The band forms in a circle and a sack of serpents is brought forth and is placed in the branches of a cottonwood shrub, known as the *kisi* just where it has stood on Moki dance days for countless generations. A chief, hideously painted, opens the sack and as each brave marches past thrusts his naked arm within and jerks from it several writhing serpents, which he hands to the buck. The snake dancer bends and seizes the snakes by their middle with his teeth, while he holds one or two serpents in each hand. The ser-

pents rattle, hiss and struggle while the human captors, gesticulating and stamping, join in a solemn rhythmic movement, in which, after each man has been supplied with serpents, the whole band is soon participating.

The Moki women and the several hundred Moki bucks who do not participate in the dancing at first sit in mute awe. As the dance proceeds the red-skinned spectators start a low humming, which gradually develops. Louder and louder rises the din of discordant voices until the women become wildly excited, and leap to their feet. Meanwhile the dance goes on. The dancers glisten with perspiration and the paint on their bodies runs down their bare backs and legs. Some of the older ones, to show their prowess with venomous reptiles, carry three and five rattlesnakes about with them. They weave the snakes about their heads; they coil them in huge balls and toss them up and down; they twine them about their necks and tuck them between the belts of their kilts and their nude waists, and carry them, held at the middle, in their mouths. All this time they are hopping about the sun baked plaza. Now they circle about the *kisi* with their burden of serpents in their hands. Then at a signal by old Kopali, the snake chief, the dancers form in threes, and with the snakes wriggling for freedom in their hands, they march backward and forward. Another signal and they form in a row and toss the serpents to and fro. Then the dance starts anew. More circling, marchings and counter-marchings in ones, twos and threes. Occasionally a reptile wriggles itself loose from an Indian's hand. It is, however, instantly picked up like so much rubber hose.

The snake dance lasts about fifty minutes. At its close the Indian spectators have risen to their feet, and are weaving their arms and bodies back and forth in time to the rapid chorus they are shouting over and over again. The dancers are dripping with perspiration. The white visitors are dazed at the incredible scene. No one who has not seen it would believe these men can be so thoroughly indifferent to the serpent's venom. Several of the dancers reel and stagger, but catch themselves as they gyrate with the tangled snarl of serpents in their hands.

Suddenly at a signal from wrinkled Kopali the dancing ceases and the high snake priest advances to an open place. He solemnly sprinkles meal in a ring, denoting all compass points to which serpent messengers are to convey the Moki petitions. At another signal the rattlesnakes are thrown in a heap within the circle. Meal is hastily thrown upon the wriggling heap, while a guttural invocation is pronounced. In a moment each of the dancers snatches several of the serpents in his hands, and starts at full speed for the narrow trail which leads down from the mesa to the plains below. There the grewsome burdens are thrown upon the sands and permitted to go their way in peace.

The dance is over, but there's another scene. When the athletic dancers have come running back to the plaza they hasten to the sacred *kiva*, where they remove all the trappings of the ceremony. Then they come out and drinking deeply from a bowl of mysterious decoction of herbs brewed only by Salako, the oldest snake woman in Mokiland.

Then the Mokis go home in silence. They have performed the most important service in their lives: and have propitiated the rain god as sacredly as they know how. Their wives and sweethearts wait upon them and wash them of their paint. On the morrow the pueblo feast takes place, and the new green corn and melons are eaten without stint.

Very naturally the question is asked: Are not the rattlesnakes used in the Moki ceremonies drugged or deprived of their fangs? If not, why are not the half-nude snake dancers and priests bitten? White people who have seen several Moki snake dances say they have never known a Moki to confess he was fanged, but every year spectators see snake dancers pull away from their arms serpents that have fastened there. Every year some of the reptiles coil and strike at their captors. The best-posted scientists who have looked upon Moki snake dances say that the priests and dancers have a certain manner of handling the creatures, and that the strange broth which the snake handlers drink renders venom harmless. At any rate it is unique among barbaric customs.



Wyoming Valley Monument, erected a few miles from Scranton, Pa., in memory of the soldiers and citizens massacred by the Indians in 1776.

Wyoming Valley is a beautiful fertile valley on the Susquehanna River. Its name is supposed to be a corruption of the Indian Maughwauwame—large plains. It was purchased from the Delaware Indians about 1765 by a Connecticut company, but the settlers were soon dispersed by savages. In 1769, 40 families came from Connecticut but found a party of Pennsylvanians in possession, and for several years there were continual contests of the settlers with the Indians, and with each other. In 1776 they armed for their own defence but in 1778, most of their troops were called to join the army under Washington. June 30, a force of 400 British provincials, or "Tories," and 700 Seneca Indians, led by Colonel John Butler, entered the valley, and were opposed by 300 men, under Colonel Zebulon Butler. On July 3, the settlers were driven to Fort Forty, many soldiers and inhabitants being murdered. On the 5th, the remnant of the troops surrendered, and they and the inhabitants were either massacred or driven from the valley, which was left a smoking solitude.